

**Solitude and Isolation as the Inevitable Penalty of Sin and Evil
Nathaniel Hawthorne's Short Story World**

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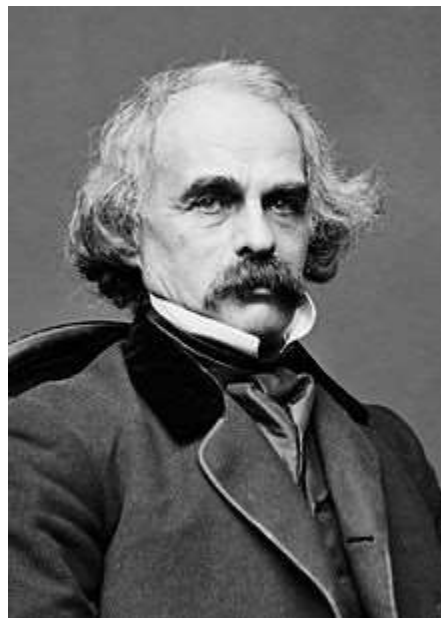
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Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864)

Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nathaniel_Hawthorne

Abstract

This paper attempts to project Nathaniel Hawthorne as one of the major novelists of America, belonging not only to the tradition of America but also to the tradition of genius playing the dual role of a novelist and a short story writer. The paper will also show how he was preoccupied with the problems of sin, guilt, responsibility, and evil. It neatly portrays the divided self as a major theme with his fictional forte in blending the marvelous and the natural as his romantic theory, bringing home the essential point that there is constant interaction between the actual and the imaginary. The world of Hawthorne is romantic, symbolic, allegoric and

ambiguous projecting the problem of solitude and isolation as the inevitable penalty of sin, guilt and evil.

Keywords: Nathaniel Hawthorne, solitude, isolation, sin, guilt, responsibility, tradition, marvelous and natural, actual and imaginary.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, one of the major novelists of America, belongs not only with the tradition of American writers, but also with the tradition of genius. Almost all his novels and short stories are based on New England setting which are rotten, in his attempt to convey the fundamental meaning and significance of mortal life. His basic reputation was that of a short story writer and sketch-writer till the publication of the *Scarlet Letter* in 1850. *Twice Told Tales* in 1837 reprinted with some enlargement in 1842 and *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1946) had built up his reputation as a writer of fine and delicate craftsmanship. But his best was in the creation of *The Scarlet Letter*, which was his first full-length story, rather superior to any full length story that he ever wrote. Truly speaking, with the publication of *The Scarlet Letter*, the American Novel came of age.

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born on July 4, 1804 in Salem, Massachusetts, of a distinguished puritan family which had played an active role in the history of Massachusetts. His early years were spent as a dependent of his uncles, one of whom had a flourishing stage-coach business. When he was twelve years old, his mother took him to live with another uncle in Raymond, Maine. In 1817, a severe leg injury crippled him, and this forced him to stay mostly at home and develop a habit of reading; however, he went through school and finally joined Bowdon College in New Brunswick, Maine in 1820-21, graduating from there in 1825. One of the results of his stay at Bowdon College was his first book namely *Fanshawe* a gothic romance which came out in 1828. Then, he was encouraged by Halation Bridge to become a full-time writer and he consequently decided to devote himself wholly to this task. From 1825 to 1837, Nathaniel Hawthorne spent his time in seclusion, reading and writing, living at the family home and sending stories to magazines and annuals of Christmas gift books of the time; over a hundred stories poured from his pen between 1830 and 1852 got gathered in three collections namely *Twice Told Tales* (1837), *Mosses from an old Manse* (1846) and *The Snow Image* (1852). Hawthorne married Sophia Peabody in 1842 and on all accounts, led a very happy married life, a part of which got recorded in that wonderful book *Mosses from an old Manse* (1845). Through his literary composition, he merited attention in comparison with the finest that contemporary Europe could produce – Thackeray, Dickens, Balzac, Hugo, Stendhal, George Eliot, Proust, Emile Zola, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 19:10 October 2019

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Hawthorne was preoccupied with the problems of sin, guilt, responsibility and was primarily concerned with moral issues. As he is said to have descended from Puritan ancestors his writings significantly reflect the elements of Puritanism. The Puritan theory rested primarily upon the doctrine of pre-destination, which preached that an elect few were destined to be saved by god's grace while the vast majority was doomed to damnation. The Puritans also placed great emphasis on the inherent sinfulness of all men. Religion was nothing but morality and objective evidence was replaced by inner assurance. Every facet of behavior of the individual took on a symbolic value. The Puritans of the 17th century were blunt men with not much capacity for mysticism and talent for deep thinking. It is crystal clear that Hawthorne recorded the special flavor of the puritan life and culture, highlighting the puritan morality, the crushing authoritarianism among its leaders and the individual consciousness against downright dogma. Hawthorne is found to be exhibiting a marked love of cases of conscience, the taciturn and scornful cast of mind - the habit of seeing sin everywhere and hell gaping open, a nature draped in mourning which prefers the lonely conversation of the imagination with conscience. The readers get exposed to the perpetual torture of the hearts of men close before men and open to God. All the elements of the Puritan character have been passed to Hawthorne through successive generations. In the words of Michael Davits Bell, "Hypocrisy emerges as an even more pervasive characteristic of the narrow Puritans than fanaticism". (P 91)

Nathaniel Hawthorne as a major writer in American literature goes back to the earlier times, to the colonial life of his ancestors. He is, to a great extent, a chip of the old block. His forefathers had been forced to cross the Atlantic for conscience' sake, in order to uphold their faith. And this staunch compelling conscience haunted the imagination of Hawthorne himself.

"Hawthorne's haunted mind viewed a physically visible world as dark and inscrutable. His mind attracted to cemeteries, crypts, caverns and dark forests, displayed a passive sensibility but no active strength". (Coale 2)

To Hawthorne, the world of matter remained impenetrable, devoid of moral and religious values. The appearance of a dark world led Hawthorne on to darker thoughts. He felt imprisoned in a fantastic world that left him isolated and remote. Hawthorne's stories are partly historical and partly fictional. Michael Davit Bell writes:

"Nathaniel Hawthorne was the most historically minded of our major novelists. From his first tales to his final unfinished romance, he turned again and again to history - particularly the early history of his native New England, which provided the material for the greatest novel and for many of his best takes". (P 91)

Though a combination of history and fiction is seen in his works, the recurrent theme is mostly sin and suffering. Hence “the melancholy provides the appropriate mood of the spell”. (P 10)

Hawthorne’s view of life was essentially tragic as one could see his frail erring characters blindly and deliberately choosing a path of evil and staggering beneath a heavy load of gloom and guilt? He was fully convinced of the positiveness and the reality of evil and his attitude to life reflected his important conceptions of sin. He considered sin as a natural product of the human heart which is a ‘foul cavern’. His second conception was ‘the violation of the human heart’, through which man was completely responsible for his evil intentions.

In his introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne implicitly asserts that the divided self was his major theme. He considers the form of romance suitable to human experience. The romantic approach, according to him, is much more ordered, patterned and less chaotic than the reader’s experience is his daily life. He chose romance to debate about human experience: “The stance of the romance gave Hawthorne a form in which he could experiment with and develop the self-conscious use of artifice”. (Stubbs 7) He is the one who blends the marvelous and the natural in his romantic theory. He effects the balance of the marvelous and the natural existing inherently in New England superstitions, because the New England experience gave him a material base. By exploring the subjective experience of his love of paradox, ambiguity in statements, duplicity in conclusions and symbolism in art, gave essentially a modern twist to the treatment of the themes of his novels and short stories.

The Scarlet Letter, which is considered the best of Hawthorne’s novels, fully exploits the concepts of sin. The novel is about the story of the steadfast loyalty of an unfaithful woman, Hester Prynne, who remains faithful to her love through seven years of hardship, social ostracism and isolation. It is a tale of passion and adultery. Hester’s husband, an English scholar, arrives two years later to find his wife in the pillory with a child in her arms and a letter ‘A’ on her breast signifying ‘Adulteress’, as a token of her sin. The husband conceals his identity and determines to discover her paramour. Hester accepts her condition with resignation. Roger Chillingworth, preoccupied with a diabolical principle of revenge, finds that Arthur Dimmesdale, the revered and respected clergyman, who is an example of Christian purity and holiness, is her partner in crime. The minister, for want of courage and because of his pride, suffers seven years with the cancer of hidden guilt. His attempt to escape with Hester is foiled by Chillingworth. After a period of mental agony, Dimmesdale confesses his sin on the pillory and dies in Hester’s arms. Here as elsewhere, Hawthorne was absorbed by the enigmas of evil and of moral responsibility which are interwoven with man’s destiny, in nature and in eternity. Hester’s sin is one of excessive passion. The very passion is responsible for her ruin. The same agony that she

is made to suffer proceeds inevitably from her character. Hester compounds the sin of passion with the sin of pride. She embroiders *The Scarlet Letter* as an expression of defiance and guilt, and she dresses her daughter in equally flamboyant colors:

“Hester is rich in her latent sensuality and peculiarly open to the demands of life instincts” (Kaplan 129)

This is stressed by her relationship with Pearl, a child of excessive, licentious passion. *The Scarlet Letter* is a Romance which means that there is constant interaction between the actual and the imaginary; one of the ways in which the imagery plays an important part is through its symbolism. One of the most important symbols in the story is the scarlet letter itself. It represents the various layers of meaning that Hawthorne wants to convey. The letter “A” changes its meaning with the growth in Hester’s character. It is, apparently, a symbol of her sin. However, it radiates other meanings as Hester becomes a “transformed” person. When Hester becomes the Ambassador of mercy, or the sister of charity, it means “Able” or even an “Angel”. It is also a mask which corners Hester’s real feelings as pictured in chapter XXI of the story. Pearl, the embodiment of the scarlet letter, is another symbol. Like the scarlet letter, she is, apparently, her mother’s “retribution” or “punishment” for her sin. Yet, like the scarlet letter, she protects her mother from persecution. She is the connecting link between Hester and Dimmesdale; She represents in her defiance what Hester was in her youth. She is also the child of Nature, compared with the “red rose” and “birds”, both of which are symbols of freedom and hope in this story of *The Scarlet Letter*. The brook in the forest, which is passing through tall, gloomy trees, is a symbol of the life in the Puritan society. It is sad because it is somber and gloomy. Trees represent the “puritans”.

Chillingworth represents Hawthorne’s idea of the ‘unpardonable sinner’. He represents excess intellect. To Hawthorne, the greatest sin is the violation of another soul and heart, simply for the purpose of finding how it would react. The sin of Arthur Dimmesdale is more of a complex nature. He is tormented by his own awareness of sin and his pride prevents him from confessing his hidden sin. He is the man of spirit caught between the force of intellect and the force of passion and so the deepest suffering of the conflict is reserved for him. Harold Kaplan writes.

“The allegory transcribes divisiveness in human character and action. The divided self was his major theme”. (P 129)

‘Loneliness’ seems to be the curse blighting the lives of most of the characters in *The Scarlet Letter*. The curse of isolation is the direct consequence of the sin of the main characters. Hester and Dimmesdale are isolated by their original sin, Chillingworth by his hatred and his sin,

which violated “the sanctity of the human heart”. In Hester’s case, her isolation is a mark of her social caste. Her “badge of shame”, meaning the scarlet letter which gains her distance from people, but it also assures her intellectual and moral growth. She “transcends her separation from society by good deeds and the companionship of miserable people”. In the minister’s case, his sensitivity to his sin leads to the guilt of his unworthiness. Chillingworth’s isolation is essentially the isolation of a man who has cast out his name off from the book of humanity, his willful defiance of God in violation of “the sanctity of the human heart” against advice, causes his spiritual isolation and death. Even Pearl is isolated from the society of the Puritan children by her mother’s sin. She is a lonely child who plays with inanimate objects or with animals and brooks and flowers - a victim of the sin of her parents and the repressiveness of the Puritan society. Chapter XXII shows Hester, pearl, Dimmesdale and Chillingworth - isolated from each other as well as from the crowd. Thus, *The Scarlet Letter* is an exercise in the theme of alienation and isolation.

The characters are shown as those searching to find the divided segments of their natures. As a Christian, Hawthorne emphasized the moral duality which is at the Centre of man’s being and founded on moral action upon a depraved person’s change of heart. Harold Kaplan comments:

“The introspective mind is darkened by a war of dual selves, though one of the two remains hidden with a permanent veil over its face. This was an image for the unexplored complexity of human character”. (P 129)

More than the torment of the moral isolation which comprises his theme, the concentration is more upon the violation of the anatomy of conscience. The vengeance of Chillingworth against Dimmesdale was diabolical, because it was based on the witness of his secret inner life. This was considered the cruelest punishment - the humiliation of the soul. Hawthorne also relates the ordeal of the private moral life to the growth of the public moral life. Dimmesdale is the public teacher, the standard-bearer of morality. But he is simultaneously the sinner in private. Chillingworth is a doctor and a healer, a man of largest wisdom in the community but wallowing in his private destruction. Hester has the public role of a sinner, but this surface covers her actual sacrificial virtue, pronounced in her service to Dimmesdale, to pearl and to the community at large. The conflict of public and private selves is the dramatic substance of Hawthorne’s tragedy.

The story of “The House of the Seven Gables” Starts with the dispute between Colonel Puncheon and old Maule, over a piece of land. The Colonel, with his great influence brings about the execution of Maule as a wizard. He takes over that piece of land and builds the house

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 19:10 October 2019

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of the seven gables. One of the descendents of Colonel, Jaffrey Puncheon persecutes his kinsmen Clifford and convicts him of murder, which was never committed, in order to become the sole possessor of the cursed property of the Colonel. Firstly, in the manner of death, one can see the germ of evil. Here Hawthorne's treatment of sin suggests social complexity. In those days, when recorded statements were non-existent, the colonel used his hereditary weight and influence to get rid of the poor carpenter, Maule who clung stubbornly to what he considered his right, and died a victim to the terrible delusion which possessed those influential classes who

“took upon themselves to be leaders of the people and who are fully liable to all passionate error characteristic of the maddest mob”. (Matthiessen 325)

The colonel was the most vigorous person to speed the execution of Moule. Hawthorne here recognizes the economic motive which had entered into the charge of witchcraft. The same economic motive which also operated in the case of Judge Puncheon who was very much like his ancestor, possessing the same ambition to enlarge and extend his family estate. Hence Hawthorne again and again stresses the innate depravity of man through the Colonel and the Judge, who inherited not only the “big, heavy solid realities such as gold and hereditary position but the inescapable trait of character”. (P 327) The judge also violated the sanctity of the human heart by trying to crush the already broken heart of his poor cousin Clifford.

Hawthorne's short stories also dealt with the problem of sin and evil. His short story “Young Goodman Brown” is deeply concerned with sin. It brings home in a terrifying manner, the tremendous power of evil, making one feel that ‘evil’ throws its shadow far and wide sparing none. Once a man sins, his sin continues to retain its firm hold on him. The tragedy of Good man Brown is that he is unaware of the power of evil and he is forced to realize the evil impact of sin. He is complacent and too sure of his own ability to resist evil and he exposes himself to the manipulation of the devil by making a pact with it. He promises to go to the meeting of the witches to have a taste of evil. The path through the forest is haunted by the devil himself. The old man who stands for the devil bears a strong resemblance to Good Man Brown, which indicates that evil is his inheritance. The devil reminds him of his ancestors, who are his friends, who had similar trips with him in the forest. Goodman Brown shows interest a scene of lustful orgy and he is forced to realize that not only his father in his time, but also the other respectable neighbors in his own time are participants of that lustful meeting. Goodman Brown once emphatically stated:

“My father never went into the woods on such an errand, nor his father before him. We have been a race of honest men and good Christians since the days of the martyrs”.
(P 381)

Now he is forced into an accumulation of doubts and takes back his statements. The narration points towards universal evil and its legacy of distrust. To his amazement and wonder, Goodman Brown learns that evil is the ultimate fact of life and everyone is in the brotherhood of sin. Melville, brooding over young Goodman Brown', calls it "the strongest of all the takes" (191) which according to him, is as deep as Dante in its penetration into the mystery of evil. Goodman Brown discovers the instinctive evil behind the conventional goodness of human character. Harold Kaplan avers:

"In young Goodman Brown', we also find the divided consciousness which is the necessary basis for the evolution of moral identity". (P 130)

Good man Brown wanders through the forest to hear the words of welcome to the communion of his race and it is found that the ceremony of unification is the constant preoccupation of Hawthorne.

The short story 'The Minister's Black Veil' centers on hidden sin. Mr. Hooper, a good preacher of a parish church appears on a particular Sabbath day with the black Veil. The subject that he preaches has a reference to the secret in which he wished to hide from his nearest and dearest friends and even from God himself. Everyone feels as if the preacher has crept upon them from behind them in his black veil and had discovered his loaded iniquity. Hawthorne here suggests the University of Sin hidden in the bosom of everyone. No one is able to unravel the mystery behind the veil. To his blighted wife, the minister refers to his sorrows which are dark enough (P27), which necessitated him to wear the veil. Even in his convulsive struggles, he could not part with it. To the people who quaked of his behavior the dying minister poses a question:

"Why do you tremble at me alone?
Tremble also at each other..... I look around me, and to!
on every visage a black veil" (P 33)

This dying speech of the minister connects his black veil with the hypocritical secret sins of mending. The minister is surely the prototype of Arthur Dimes short stories like *Ethan Brand*, *Dr. Rappaccini's Daughter* and the *Birth Mark* reflect the same theme. The protagonists of these stories strongly bear a resemblance to Chillingworth of *The Scarlet Letter*. *Ethan Brand* is the story of a simple loving and meditative time burner, who begins to contemplate on things above the reach of the ordinary intellect. He comments a nature ceases to keep peace with the growth of his intellect and the result of his life's labors his "unpardonable sin". (P 419) The story like *The Birth Mark* translates the breach between man and nature into a

contest between the imagination and reality. The real images in the brain resist the given dross of the real world. But the dross of the real world includes human relations and persons.

“The imagination itself is human and so the struggle for perfection is merely a kind of civil war unless it is dominated by human valuations”. (P 142)

Hawthorne called his books ‘psychological Romance’ as they depict the psychological effects of sin on the individuals. The central theme of most of his works is not sin alone as a theological problem, but also the psychological effect of the conviction of sin on the lives of people. Like Edger Allan Poe, Hawthorne was the explorer of the dark recesses of the human soul, rather than solve the dilemma of human destiny. In a sure way, Hawthorne goes on exploring the soul of the young minister in *The Scarlet Letter*, who is unparalleled in all literature for its psychological interest. It may be argued that Hawthorne’s interest is not in sin but in the sense of guilt which follows it. Edward Wagenknecht rightly comments:

“The main theme of *The Scarlet Letter* is not the sin of illicit love but the consequent sins of hypocrisy and their effect on the soul” (P 45).

Another aspect connected with the psychological effect of sin on human beings is the state of solitude and isolation. Hawthorne deals with the loneliness that follows man, once he is cast away by sin. Solitude is the burden and penalty laid upon sinners by the eternal decree for sin and sin is the seeking of self and turning away from the commonalty of the world. Solitary feeling is the worst tragedy in human life. Samuel Chase Cole remarks:

“Hawthorne looked out upon a dark imprisoning world. He also looked within to a soul imprisoned and isolated. The world oppressed the self, which in turn oppressed the soul, the inner spirit”. (P 4)

To conclude, it may be said that the world of Nathaniel Hawthorne is romantic, symbolic, allegoric and ambiguous with a focus on the projection of sin, evil and guilt leading to inevitable loneliness and isolation in life.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 19:10 October 2019

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